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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on how, by reinforcing and exploiting the emphasis on electronic technologies in school reform, marketers are integrating school children into the advertising and marketing system. The ZapMe! program is a for-profit venture that proposes to derive its profits from activities that link the academic activities of schools and the marketing activities of corporations in a seamless web. The ZapMe! Corporation provides computer labs and Internet access to K-12 schools in return for advertising or promotional access to students and their families, is used to illustrate how technology and commercialism are being linked in school reform. The following problematic aspects and policy issues related to the ZapMe! program are described: (1) hardware and software provided by ZapMe! may not be the best or most appropriate; (2) the financial relationship between ZapMe! and corporations that provide educational content raises the issue of bias; (3) the extent to which ZapMe! is used for required lessons is the degree to which students are forced by school authorities to view certain favored commercials; (4) the provision of student demographic information to special interest raises privacy concerns; (5) ZapMe! requires that participating schools provide use of its equipment during after-school hours for community education, corporate training and/or testing purposes; (6) schools are required to distribute marketing materials designed by ZapMe! sponsors for students to take home with them; and (7) ZapMe! Points Program prizes are sent directly to students' homes. (Contains 19 references and a flow chart explaining the process.)(MES)

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Integrating the Schoolhouse and the Marketplace:

A Preliminary Assessment of the Emerging Role of Electronic Technology

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Introduction

In his April 8, 1999, *Washington Post* column, George Will criticized a proposal to put advertising on the sleeves of baseball player's uniforms. Will reasoned that such advertising crossed a line between advertising strategically placed so that large numbers of people are likely to see it and "advertising so unavoidable it is assaultive." He concluded that '... within the cheerful swirl of commerce at a ballpark, there is a baseball game – dignified competition in a zone of its own, within the white lines."[1] If "advertising so unavoidable it is assaultive" is unacceptable in baseball it is even more offensive in a school setting.

A child's presence in school, unlike attendance at a baseball game, is coerced. Over the past two decades advertisers have increasingly exploited this fact. Today, in schools all over America students are routinely required to view advertising in order to complete class assignments or are denied access to learning technologies unless they provide marketers information about themselves and their families. These practices seem certain to increase as the current emphasis on computer technology and utilization of the world wide web encourages the formation of more "public-private partnerships" to provide computers, software, and web access. Today, the price of a computer lab, or a school web site, is very often the willingness to provide advertisers access to students and to information about students and their families. The current focus on electronic technologies as a key element in school reform and improvement thus makes issues such as how to define a school's "zone of its own" and where the "white lines" that define it should be drawn more important than ever.

The focus of this paper is how, by reinforcing and exploiting the emphasis on electronic technologies in school reform, marketers are more fully integrating school children into America's advertising and marketing system. ZapMe! Corporation, which provides computer labs and internet access to K-12 schools in return for advertising or promotional access to students and their families, is used to illustrate how technology and commercialism are being linked in American school reform.

Linking Technology and Marketing: ZapMe! Corporation

ZapMe! Corporation, founded in 1996, defines its business model as "Bringing Together Technology Providers, Sponsors, and Schools."[2] The company describes itself as "a satellite delivery-based computer network system providing safe, high-speed, Internet access and aggregated educational content to K-12 schools across the United States."[3] Its "Netspace" program for K-12 schools was launched during the 1998-99 school year. As of April 1999 ZapMe! claimed to be fully operational in 90 schools and to have signed up 5,000 more.[4]

Participating schools get between 5 and 15 desktop computers with 17" monitors, a network server, a laser printer, and a satellite dish. All the equipment is installed and maintained by ZapMe!. The company also provides training and technical support for teachers and students.[5] According to an October 21, 1998, press release, ZapMe! hardware and software is provided by corporations such as Compaq Computer Corporation (computers), GE Americom (satellite service), Microsoft Corporation (software), and Philips Consumer Electronics (monitors).[6] These corporations provide their products and services in order to "showcase" their brands. The

ZapMe! promotional material explains, "Corporations WANT to support education. Corporations are looking for ways to support Education. ZapMe! Corporation has established a unique business/school partnership that is a win-win arrangement for all." [7]

ZapMe! computers are equipped with word processing, spreadsheet, and presentation software. No software other than that provided by the corporation can be installed. ZapMe! "Netspace" offers e-mail, chat rooms, and access to pre-selected web sites (approximately 10,000, according to the company).[8] In addition, schools may, if they choose, provide unrestricted Internet access using the ZapMe! system.[9] Corporations pay ZapMe to provide access to curriculum materials they have developed. General Electric, for example, has purchased advertising space on the ZapMe! browser and paid a fee to have web content about space that it developed placed on the ZapMe! "Netspace."[10]

ZapMe! provides hardware, software, and content without direct cost to participating schools. Schools do, however, incur obligations beyond providing the necessary space, telephone connection, electrical service, and supplies such as paper for the laser printer when they sign a contract with ZapMe!. The ZapMe! contract, for example, requires that each computer in the ZapMe! computer lab be in use an average of four hours a day; that schools provide ZapMe! corporate partners with access to the system after hours; that schools participating in ZapMe! "take home" programs; and that school staff will provide feedback to the company about its services and features.[11] As a reward for spending time on the ZapMe! system students can earn "ZapMe! Points" good for prizes such as software.[12]

Policy Issues Raised By ZapMe!

On the surface the ZapMe! program has a lot of appeal. It appears to foster broadly supported educational goals such as promoting computer literacy and providing students with access to the "information superhighway." It also purports to address the lack of resources available to design and implement school technology programs by harnessing the good will and self-interest of corporate America. As an added plus it seems to address the equity concerns of many school reformers. ZapMe! is available to rich and poor schools alike. Despite its surface appeal, ZapMe! poses serious challenges to policy makers.

The ZapMe! program is a for-profit venture that proposes to derive its profits from activities that link the academic activities of schools and the marketing activities of corporations (see Figure 1) in a seamless web. This necessarily raises ethical and public policy issues. Seven problematic aspects of the ZapMe! program are described below.

1) Hardware suppliers (e.g., Compaq) and software suppliers (e.g., Microsoft) provide their products for the purpose of brand exposure and building future market share. The logic is that students trained using their products are more likely to continue to use those products. Also, the more students trained in particular software applications the greater the incentive for employers to purchase those applications.

Policy issue: The hardware and software provided by ZapMe! may not be the best or most appropriate for use in a school setting. The decision about which products to use is based on a corporate business strategy not an educational plan.

2) Corporations pay ZapMe! to put educational programs that they have developed onto the ZapMe! "Netspace."

Policy issue: The financial relationship between ZapMe! and corporations that provide educational content raises the issue of bias, a well documented concern associated with corporate sponsored educational materials.[13] In addition, instead of curriculum options that have been developed or selected by their teachers, the materials available to students are those created or chosen by whichever corporation was able and willing to pay to have them posted.

3) Corporations pay to place advertising ("brand imaging") on the ZapMe! "Netspace" browser. The Associated Press reports that, in a demonstration of advertising on ZapMe!, when corporate President Frank Vigil clicked on a Schick Razor banner it brought up a full-motion commercial featuring "an attractive blonde confidently marching through the streets as people rushed to protect her freshly shaved legs." According to a ZapMe! spokesperson, clicking on a banner might equally well mean being transported to a corporate web site or "pretty much whatever they [the corporation] want" to get the message across.[14]

Policy issue: The extent to which ZapMe! is used for required lessons is the degree to which students are forced by school authorities to view certain favored commercials (i.e., those provided by ZapMe! partners). In addition, the values promoted in commercials may very often directly or indirectly conflict with a school's overall curricular message.

4) ZapMe! provides aggregated data on students to its advertisers. The company monitors which of its web sites are most frequently visited and collects information on each student's age,

gender, grade level, and zip code. This information can then be used to target advertising campaigns.[15]

Policy issue: The provision of student demographic information to special interests, even in aggregate form, raises concerns about the right of children and their families to privacy. This is made even more troublesome because the information is gathered by requiring that students provide it in order to participate in a school activity.

5) ZapMe! requires that participating schools provide use of its equipment on school property during after school hours for "community education, corporate training and/or testing purposes." ZapMe! recently announced that it had entered a strategic partnership with Sylvan Learning Systems. Sylvan will use ZapMe!'s access to participating schools to launch internet-based educational and testing services offered primarily during after school hours.[16]

Policy issue: Schools represent a significant capital expenditure. The issue of whether or not a for-profit entity should be granted free access to school facilities to engage in its business activities or promote its products and services deserves careful consideration. Such access may be construed as unfairly favoring a particular profit-making entity not only by providing free space but by, in effect, promoting that particular entity's products and services through programmatic tie-ins with ZapMe!. Also community and student groups may have their access limited by the presence of corporate activities.

6) ZapMe! requires that schools participate in what it terms "take home programs." These are marketing materials that will be designed by ZapMe! sponsors for students to take home with

them. They may promote contests and other activities that supplement a sponsor's "on-line message."[17]

Policy issue: Schools are required to participate in ZapMe!'s "take home" program. Student participation is voluntary. Nevertheless, it would likely be a small minority of students who would not take home promotional materials handed out by the school. The issue here is the extent to which the school should be an agent of ZapMe! sponsors in reaching students, their parents, and other members of the family.

7) The ZapMe! Points Program offers students prizes as a reward for spending time on the ZapMe! system.

Policy issue: Prizes awarded by the ZapMe! Points Program are sent directly to students' homes.[18] This offers ZapMe!'s corporate sponsors another avenue of entrance into student's homes, access that can be used to promote their products and services. It also allows ZapMe! to compile data such as student addresses.

Conclusion

The issues of whether such technologies represent an opportunity to positively transform the processes of teaching and learning and what the relative emphasis given electronic technologies in school reform should be are far from settled. Nevertheless, throughout America, politicians, educators, policy makers, corporate executives, and community leaders have already become vocal advocates of computer/internet technology in the schools. Software and hardware companies claim only to be responding to the market's demands for their products, but in fact

they have had and continue to have a guiding hand in developing this market and creating the policy environment in which it can flourish.[19] In this environment, commercialized programs, which promise free hardware and/or software and/or Internet access appeal to many schools. The question that has yet to be seriously considered is whether and under what circumstances commercialized programs are likely to do more harm than good.

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[1] George F. Will, "Leave the Sleeves Alone," *Washington Post*, 8 April 1999, p. A31.
[2] ZapMe!Corporation, "ZapMe! Press Kit: Corporate Backgrounder," no date.
[3] ZapMe! Corporation, "ZapMe! Press Kit: Fact Sheet," no date.
[4] 13 April 1999 telephone conversation between Steven Manning and Randi Polanich, ZapMe! spokeswoman.
[5] ZapMe! Corporation corporate website, "The Package" page (www.zapme.com/corp/schools/s_pack.html), and "Benefits" page (www.zapme.com/corp/schools/s_ben.html), cited on 15 April 1999.
[6] ZapMe! Corporation, "ZapMe! Netspace Assembles Leading Technology Companies to Bring Free Computer Labs to Schools," 21 October 1998 press release.
[7] ZapMe! Corporation, "ZapMe! Press Kit: Corporate Sponsors," 22 October 1998.
[8] Andrew Hagelshaw, Center for Commercial-Free Public Education, "Notes and Impressions After Receiving a Demonstration of Zap Me," 17 December 1998.
[9] ZapMe! Corporation, "ZapMe! Press Kit: Corporate Backgrounder," no date.
[10] "ZapMe! Offers Free Intranet Computers in Exchange for Ads Aimed at Kids," *eSchool News*, 10 August 1998.
[11] ZapMe! Corporation corporate website, "Conditions" page (www.zapme.com/corp/schools/s_cond.html), cited on 15 April 1999.
[12] Andrew Hagelshaw, Center for Commercial-Free Public Education, "Notes and Impressions After Receiving a Demonstration of Zap Me," 17 December 1998.
[13] See *Captive Kids: Commercial Pressures on Kids at School* (Yonkers, N.Y.: Consumers Union Education Services, 1995); and Alex Molnar, *Giving Kids the Business: The Commercialization of America's Schools* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996), ch. 2.
[14] Chris Allbritton, "Free Computers Blur Line Between Student and Shopper, Critics Say," Associated Press, 30 November 1998.
[15] Chris Allbritton, "Free Computers Blur Line Between Student and Shopper, Critics Say," Associated Press, 30 November 1998.
[16] ZapMe! Corporation, "Sylvan Learning Systems to Launch Internet-Based Education and Training Programs Utilizing ZapMe! Network," 31 March 1999 press release.
[17] DD Marketing, "ZapMe! Frequently Asked Questions," information packet, no date.
[18] Andrew Hagelshaw, Center for Commercial-Free Public Education, "Notes and Impressions After Receiving a Demonstration of Zap Me," 17 December 1998.
[19] The work of Douglas D. Noble is informative on this subject. See "A Bill of Goods: The Early Marketing of Computer-Based Education and Its Implications for the Present Moment," in Bruce J. Biddle, Thomas L. Good, and Ivor F. Goodson, eds., *International Handbook of Teachers and Teaching* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997); and Douglas D. Noble, *Classroom Arsenal: Military Research, Information Technology, and Public Education* (London: Falmer Press, 1991).

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Figure 1: ZapMe! Corporation, Its Partners, and Schools

ZapMe!, its technology partners, and sponsors put together a package of free technology for schools
Technology partners and sponsors include: GE Americom, Toshiba, Compaq Computer, Microsoft, Philips Consumer Electronics, Sylvan Learning Systems, TIBCO, and Gilat Satellite Networks
ZapMe! and its marketing representative, DD Marketing, promote the package to schools
Schools get a computer lab that includes:
5-15 computers, a printer, satellite dish, installation, training, tech support, and access to ZapMe! Netspace (including an intranet of 10,000 pre-selected websites, email, and chat rooms)
Students get ZapMe! Points and sponsored take-home materials
Students are given points for time spent on the ZapMe! system. ZapMe! Points are redeemed at an electronic mall for software and similar items. Take-home programs are corporate-sponsored education or entertainment materials.
ZapMe! gets
Advertising revenues from its advertisers
ZapMe! gets
Revenues from its sponsors for placing corporate-sponsored materials on its Netspace
ZapMe! gets
Demographic data on students which it uses to microtarget ads to specific populations and users
ZapMe! gets
A guaranteed audience for its ads averaging 4 hours per day per computer as required in the ZapMe! contract
ZapMe! gets
A guaranteed audience for its advertisers' sponsored curricular materials as required in the ZapMe! contract
ZapMe! gets
Students' home addresses so that Zap Points prizes can be sent directly to them
ZapMe!'s partners get
Demographic data on students they can use to microtarget ads to specific populations and users
ZapMe!'s partners get
Advertising space on the ZapMe! Netspace
ZapMe!'s partners get
Student exposure to their technology products in school
ZapMe!'s partners get
Use of the ZapMe! equipment and schools' lab space after school hours for corporate purposes

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